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On the Professions

Causes of Campus Calm: Scaling China's Ivory Tower

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In the more than twenty-five years since the momentous student-led Tiananmen uprising of 1989, university campuses in the People's Republic of China (PRC) have been notably tranquil. The situation is particularly striking in light of the veritable explosion of popular protest found among virtually all other sectors of post-Tiananmen Chinese society. Land conflicts by rural villagers, labor disputes by urban workers, environmental protests by a rising middle class—to name only some of the most prominent varieties of popular resistance—contribute to an impressive level of contention in contemporary China. Yet, in the midst of this widespread social ferment, college students and their professors have remained conspicuously compliant. The only significant student participation in protest activity has taken the form of regime-sponsored nationalistic demonstrations against Japanese claims to the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. Such acquiescence cannot be attributed to any inherent passivity on the part of Chinese academics. Prior to Tiananmen, every generation of twentieth-century Chinese intellectuals engaged in consequential political protest. Moreover, the recent "sunflower movement" in Taiwan and the "occupy central" demonstrations in Hong Kong indicate the continuing capacity of university students in

other parts of Greater China to mobilize large-scale political protests in direct opposition to PRC policies.

My current research seeks to explain the means by which the Chinese Communist party-state maintains campus calm, despite the many unpopular and potentially unsettling higher education reforms—from the introduction of student tuition fees to the imposition of faculty publication requirements—that the Ministry of Education has implemented in recent years. The party-state’s methods of control are multifaceted and dynamic, continually evolving to reflect the latest developments in international pedagogy and information technology. These techniques include mental health screening and military training, as well as formal and informal instruction in political ideology, moral values, and Chinese history and culture. Dissemination of officially approved messages is not confined to the classroom: social media are used extensively (and often unobtrusively) as a means to communicate the party line.

A dense network of “guidance counselors” (*fudaoyuan*)—trained personnel tasked with keeping close tabs on their student charges to ensure that their beliefs and behaviors do not violate approved boundaries—forms a mainstay of the control regimen at PRC universities. Typically advanced graduate students and young instructors in their late twenties or early thirties, the counselors (assisted by student informants) report to the deputy party secretaries responsible for student work at all levels of the university structure. The guidance counselors also help mobilize students to participate in various “voluntary associations,” often under the direct or indirect auspices of the Communist Party or Youth League, which deliver a range of social services, including eldercare for senior citizens and education for migrant children. The result of this associational activism is to relieve the state of some of its onerous welfare burden while at

the same time providing an outlet for student engagement that is supportive, rather than subversive, of the political system.

Ironically, among the most powerful weapons in the PRC's arsenal of control mechanisms is the promotion of a battery of assessment measures—by no means unique to China—that are internationally recognized as standard metrics for any globally competitive system of higher education. At the core of these evaluation procedures is a fixation with *scaling*, or quantifiable ratings of “quality,” that pervade (and pervert) both official and unofficial criteria of scholarly excellence. A driving motivation behind China's contemporary higher education reforms, first unveiled in 1998, has been the effort to catapult the country's leading universities into the upper echelons of “world-class universities,” as reflected in the *Times Higher Education*, *Shanghai Jiaotong*, *QS*, and other rankings of top research universities in the world. The PRC has pumped enormous amounts of funding into this endeavor via centrally mandated programs such as Project 211 (initiated in 1995) and Project 985 (1998). To protect its generous financial investment, the state has also imposed an elaborate system of evaluation and compensation—consciously tailored to the benchmarks of the world university rankings—that serves to structure and constrain the activities and attitudes of Chinese academics.

Bibliometrics—the counting of articles published in SCI (Scientific Citation Index) and SSCI (Social Science Citation Index) journals—has become the gold standard for measuring China's progress in scaling the ivory tower. As a component of this strategic ascent, armies of postdoctoral fellows have been hired by all of China's major universities. These young scholars (often with considerable overseas research and study experience) have no teaching duties and are employed on short-term contracts, renewable upon producing a specified quota of SCI or SSCI journal articles. Faculty members are also rewarded with generous bonuses for publishing in

these designated outlets. The result is an academy more preoccupied with fulfilling “productivity” targets than with political criticism.

In determining the global rankings of universities, the number and size of research grants is, of course, another important criterion: world-class universities are supposed to have world-class funding. China’s Communist Party games the system of grantsmanship so that it functions simultaneously to improve the global rankings of Chinese universities and to inhibit the independence of researchers. The party, through its propaganda departments at both central and provincial levels, exercises considerable control over university research by setting priorities for large-scale grants. In the social sciences and humanities, the propaganda departments’ influence can be seen in the extraordinary number of major grants earmarked for the study of General Secretary Xi Jinping’s “China Dream,” for example. There is both tremendous pressure on faculty to apply for these lucrative and prestigious grants and severe discrimination against those who are unwilling to or unsuccessful in garnering them. Such funding affects not only faculty salaries and promotions, but also university standings.

The party-state’s generous funding of higher education, propelled in large part by the prospect of rising rapidly in the global rankings, is surely a key reason for the notable quiescence of the Chinese academy. It is sometimes suggested that Chinese universities can never become “world class” as long as Communist Party committees remain in charge; but that depends on how we define a world-class university. If research universities are measured by the quantities of publications they produce or the sizes of the research grants they secure, then the party’s ability to channel vast amounts of state resources toward such outcomes is a decided advantage.

But China’s skillful scaling of the ivory tower is important not only in helping to explain an otherwise puzzling absence of campus protest in the PRC. Inasmuch as American universities

are also engaged in the frenetic global competition to attain or retain “world-class” status, not to mention their interest in attracting tuition dollars from China, the Chinese approach to higher education competition implicates us all.